



Portraits of Patriotism

“Flashlight Surgery” — Saipan, 1944

SINCE antiquity, soldiers have feared the crippling effects or disfigurement of wounds — often more than they feared death itself. “Flashlight Surgery,” a painting by Robert Benney depicting the challenge of treating casualties during the World War II battle of Saipan, pays tribute to the surgeons, nurses and medics of the Army Medical Corps who fought against death, mutilation and disease.

That challenge was especially hazardous for Army medics in the Pacific campaign, whom the Japanese refused to recognize as noncombatants. And yet, if an Army medic could dodge the incoming bullets to reach a wounded soldier, patch him up and drag him out of harm’s way to a field hospital for surgery, that soldier’s chances for survival increased dramatically from those of his predecessors in uniform. The statistics tell the tale: During the Civil War, 50 percent or more of the men admitted to hospitals died; during World War I, it was 8 percent; World War II, 4 percent.

Put into numbers, if the Army’s overall death rate in World War I had continued in World War II, 500,000 more Americans would not have returned home alive. That so many more were saved is doubtless because of advances in military medicine. Preventive medicine and combat psychiatry reduced the cost of jungle war, for instance, and inspired ordinary men to endure the almost unendurable. But the most direct cause for saving lives was the tireless efforts of exhausted military surgeons and staffs who pressed on — even by flashlight — to keep soldiers alive. — *CPT Patrick Swan*

